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THE UMSSP - AN INNOVATIVE VENTURE.

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A GRANT FROM THE FORD FOUNDATION WAS USED IN ESTABLISHING THE UPPER MIDWEST SMALL SCHOOLS PROJECT (UMSSP). THIS PROJECT INCLUDED FIFTEEN MEMBER SCHOOLS IN NORTH DAKOTA AND MONTANA. THE ORIGINAL OBJECTIVES WERE--(1) TO IDENTIFY POTENTIAL LEADERS IN RURAL EDUCATION, (2) TO PROVIDE ASSISTANCE AND ADDED MATERIALS TO DEVELOP THIS LEADERSHIP ROLE OF TEACHERS, AND TO ASSIST IN DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP IN THIS GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION, AND (3) TO ESTABLISH A PATTERN BY WHICH OTHER SCHOOLS IN RURAL AREAS MAY BE ORGANIZED TO FACILITATE THE INCORPORATION OF EDUCATIONAL INNOVATIONS. DURING PRE-UMSSP PLANNING THE CONSENSUS WAS THAT TEACHER PARTICIPATION ON A LARGE SCALE WOULD BE VITAL TO THE SUCCESS OF THE OPERATION. IN THE INITIAL STAGES OF ORGANIZATION, A QUESTIONNAIRE WAS DEVELOPED TO IDENTIFY THE SPECIFIC PROBLEMS EXISTING AMONG UMSSP TEACHERS, AND TO DETERMINE INNOVATIVE METHODS ALREADY IN USE. A SUMMARY OF THE 230 TEACHER RESPONSES REVEALED MANY INNOVATIVE PRACTICES BEING USED SUCH AS TEAM-TEACHING, NON-GRADING, UNIQUE AUDIO-VISUAL EQUIPMENT USAGE, AND MODERN MATH AND GRAMMAR. THE TEACHER NEEDS, AS EXPRESSED THROUGH THE QUESTIONNAIRE, INCLUDED--CONSULTANTS' EXPERTISE IN SOME AREAS, BETTER IN-SERVICE TRAINING FOR TEACHERS, AND EXCHANGE VISITS BY TEACHERS. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE COLLEGE OF EDUCATION RECORD, VOL. 52, NO. 3, DECEMBER, 1966. (ES)

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The UMSSP — An Innovative Venture

Richard Kunkel

The Upper Midwest Small Schools Project, aimed primarily at the improvement of instructional methods, involves a group of 15 member schools in North Dakota and Montana. As an incorporated non-profit organization, the UMSSP is governed by a seven-man board consisting of elected representatives of the member schools, a representative of the University of North Dakota, and a member of the State Department of Public Instruction.

Dr. A. W. Sturges, Chairman of the Department of Education at the University of North Dakota and Executive Secretary of the UMSSP, made the following statement concerning the project:

> "The Upper Midwest Small Schools Project was developed to assist teachers in incorporating change. Its strength is its multiple-mind approach in identifying problems and searching for ways to best solve those problems. The exchange of information among teachers, and the assistance of experts, should facilitate this change and the incorporation of new techniques. These attempts to individualize instruction are certainly not new. Discussions of the individual child have been continuing throughout this century. Only recently, however, have the necessary resources and technical developments made possible the individualized school program."

Although UMSSP is in its infancy, it has already achieved some amazing improvements in its member schools. Using three successive grants, the project has accumulated from national sources a wealth of information concerning innovative practices and an extensive library of materials for use by UMSSP classroom teachers, and is now in the process of establishing these innovations in the member schools.

The initial grant from the Ford Foundation ("Fund for the Advancement of Education")) provided financing for superintendents of member schools to visit innovative schools throughout the United States and study new methods and materials. Later, the superintendents, at their own expense, attended a four-week workshop devoted to examining innovative practices and applying them to the solution of local problems. Member schools have indicated their willingness to incorporate these changes.

The second grant came from the Kettering Foundation and is being used by member schools to conduct workshops aimed at helping teachers understand the purpose and the techniques of individualized instruction. The workshops serve to stimulate creative teachers in looking for new ways to develop individualized instruction in their own classrooms and provide a useful media for exchange of teaching ideas among the member schools.*

Funds from the Upper Midwest Regional Educational Laboratory

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were granted to UMSSP for use in pursuing the following objectives as described in the proposal for the grant:

1. To identify potential leaders in rural education;
2. To provide assistance and added materials to develop this leadership role of teachers, and to assist in developing leadership in this geographic location;
3. To establish a pattern by which other schools in rural areas may be organized to facilitate the incorporation of new educational innovations.

The program under the UMREL grant began with a meeting at Minot for the executive committee and a later meeting at Rugby, North Dakota, for all superintendents and principals. On these occasions, members of the UMSSP board described the various activities of interest to teachers and explored various avenues through which teachers could be involved. It was the concensus of the groups that success of the project would require teacher participation on a large scale.

During the meetings, a program evolved which called for teachers, chosen by fellow teachers, to exchange visitations among member schools. The first exchange consisted of interviews between the visiting teachers and the teachers and superintendents of the visited schools, with a view to developing a pattern for direct assistance to teachers in the improvement of instruction. The Department of Education at the University of North Dakota developed and evaluated an open-ended instrument for the use of the teacher interviewers. This instrument, designed to identify the specific problems existing among UMSSP teachers, was to be used only as a guideline; teachers were encouraged to add comments or suggestions.

The general areas covered in the questionnaire are apparent in the following:

1. What content changes have you made in your subjects the past two years? (e.g., textbook changes, addition of topics, correspondence courses, programmed materials, etc.)
2. What changes in methods of teaching have you used the past two years which, in your opinion, have merit? (e.g., use of team teaching, overhead projector, tape recorder, film strips, non-grading, etc.)
3. What has been the greatest deterrent to the improvement of instruction in your subject areas?
4. Each question included a request to name the specific kind(s) of assistance wanted.

A summary of results of the 230 teacher interviews yielded the following facts:

Textbook changes are recent and extensive, especially in the teaching of modern mathematics in the elementary schools; the trend has carried over to the high school level. Almost all these schools are giving foreign language courses. The use of programmed instruction is surprisingly extensive, especially in English, mathematics and foreign languages. Emphasis on current affairs is emerging in the social studies curriculum.

Some of these schools are adding to their English program semantics, debating, modern grammar and advanced composition. Art and writing projects are coming into prominence. The elementary schools are using a large amount of SRA reading materials. These and many other responses to the questionnaire indicated a general climate of curriculum change in these UMSSP schools.

Results of the interviews give evidence that these schools have made a great stride toward improving instruction through the use of audio visual aids, including overhead projectors; some schools have overhead projectors in every classroom from grade one through grade twelve. Teachers are using extensively a combination of tape recorders and overhead projectors for the benefit of slow learners as well as for general enrichment of learning. One mathematics teacher, for instance, prepares the lessons on transparencies and tapes the discussion; thus, when an absentee student returns to class he can make independent use of the overhead projector, the teacher-made transparencies and the taped discussion for the particular lesson or lessons he has missed.

Film strips, 16mm. films and opaque projectors are in general use; other modern technical aids employed are controlled readers, tachistoscopes, recordings, view masters and language masters.

Several elementary schools are using the non-grading method of teaching which can appear in various forms. For instance, one class in English might be made up of students from two or more high school grades being taught in the same room by several teachers and aides, individualizing each student's instruction by means of commercially and teacher-prepared materials; or a group of elementary students can follow in their own books while listening to a tape recording of a story, or use tapes for individual spelling practice while other students are working independently or in small groups in the same subject area.

Team teaching, in which many teachers are actively interested, is in use to some extent in elementary grades but much more widely in high schools. This is a technique by which a group of teachers cooperate formally or informally in planning, preparing, teaching and evaluating an instructional program for a large group of students.

As requested in the guideline questionnaire, teachers expressed their needs; the responses cover a wide range. The most common concern is for help in more effective use of audiovisual aids in classroom situations. Elementary school teachers emphasize the need for asssitance in such specialized areas as music and art, although some schools are employing teachers in these fields. Many teachers still feel a need for help in individualizing their programs, especially in mathematics; many also want more help in programmed instruction and would like to share ideas and materials with member schools.

A large number of teachers are interested in all curriculum innovations with exchange of visits and ideas with teachers of other schools. High school teachers feel a need for subject-area consultants and visiting lecturers. Teachers in general would be glad to have help in selecting materials pertinent to their teaching specialties. Many need help in preparing transparencies and would like to par

ticipate in a wide exchange of innovations in teacher-made transparencies.

Consultants in team-teaching are in great demand, as are also a list of resource people for lecturing via the amplified telephone and the establishment of a media center to disperse film strips, slides, tapes, recording, etc., to member schools.

Most teachers feel that the greatest deterrent to improvement of instruction is the inability of many teachers to individualize their teaching. As one teacher expressed it in the interview, "The greatest deterrent to improvement in instruction is the instructor himself." Another considered the greatest deterrent to be the apathetic attitude and inflexibility of teachers as well as the general public.

For the interviews with superintendents, various items were added to the guideline questionnaire. The superintendents responded to questions about changes of schedules, multiple classes, shared services, school aides, in-service training, modifications of facilities and the specific kinds of assistance needed in these areas.

The responses revealed that flexible schedules of various types now prevail in several schools. Most of these schools have multiple classes, chiefly in industrial arts, home economics, business education and mathematics; as an example, a class of advanced algebra and geometry is offered at the same time by the same teacher. This system seems to work for schools with limited enrollment where scheduling of separate classes would be difficult.

The sharing of services in such areas as music and speech therapy is fairly common; one school is sharing with other schools the services of its guidance counselor. Only students are used as school aides, because the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction does not permit the use of non-certificated teacher aides. The superintendents generally see a great need for these paraprofessionals.

Some schools are offering in-service training in modern mathematics, remedial reading, audio-visual aids (especially the overhead projector), individualized instruction, teaching innovations and teaching machines.

Member schools have recently made many changes and improvements in their facilities, such as the installation of study carrels for individualized study, and the installation of darkening curtains in many classrooms for use of visual aids. One school has converted an old high school assembly hall to an elementary library by tearing out the stage, adding carpeting, new lighting and furniture. The same school has also converted an old locker room by renovating it to make a neat and very useful space for remedial reading.

Another school has modified two buses and a trailer house and literally takes the school to the children. The conversion involved stripping a camper trailer and removing half the seats from the buses, installing student mobile stations in each vehicle and adding desks and chalkboards for the teachers. During the summer months, the vehicles were sent out with teachers to specific areas, usually half a township in size, where a small group of students, six or eight, would be taught special skills and remedial courses. This approach is simplifying the task of educating about 300 students in a district

which includes 300 square miles and is handicapped by transportation difficulties.

One school has set up an audio-visual center; several have installed folding walls, an excellent aid to team teaching, allowing work with large or small groups. Pegboard is used extensively in some of the schools in a variety of ways, such as for setting up study carrels, or room dividers to provide display space, extra movable shelving and coat-and-cap storage.

Asked to express their conceptions of instructional needs, the superintendents named many of the same ones listed by the teachers, such as the emphatic need for workshops or in-service training programs in the use of visual aids. They also felt that their teachers could profit from training in the use of multiple classes, and they gave priority to the need for help in flexible scheduling.

The future activities of the UMSSP will include an in-service meeting each month in each of the participating schools. The content of these meetings will focus on the teacher and on the instructional needs which teachers have indicated. Consultants from various sources in the area of the most commonly expressed need will assist with these in-service programs. Superintendents of various member schools will also contribute assistance; many of them, while traveling under the Ford Foundation grant, had the benefit of observing key innovations in actual operation.

As time goes on, exchanges of school visitations will become more frequent, emphasizing the sharing of key ideas and methods. This sharing will accelerate through the use of an amplified telephone system, which some schools are already using as a teaching device, and which is planned for each UMSSP school.

The UMREL grant will pay for the installation and monthly rental of these telephones, but each district will pay for its own telephone calls. This telephone system will unquestionably be a major aid to teachers and administrators, putting them readily in touch with one another and with the project consultants, and economically bringing the professional help of many specialists into the classroom.

At the end of the current school year, member school teachers will attend a special one-week workshop at the University of North Dakota. At that time, the year's program will be evaluated and recommendations made for the following school year.

It is expected that many readers will say, "We have used these ideas for years." Not all schools, however, and not all teachers, have had the resources and technical equipment necessary for operating the individualized school program on such a broad scale as UMSSP envisions. The ultimate purpose is to bring together and share all available bits and pieces of knowledge in the field of instruction and thereby improve the quality of our small school education.

*A full description of these workshops can be found in "Individualizing Instruction," a report published in September, 1966, by the Department of Education at the Universit oyf North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota, and which can be procured by writing to the UMSSP, Department of Education, University of North Dakota.